# FOREIGN FIGHTERS

*An Updated Assessment of the Flow of Foreign Fighters into Syria and Iraq*

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## *An Updated Assessment of the Flow of Foreign Fighters into Syria and Iraq*

THE SOUFAN GROUP

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## Key Findings

• In June 2014, The Soufan Group released its initial *Foreign Fighters in Syria* report, which identified approximately 12,000 foreign fighters from 81 countries.[1]

• Nearly eighteen months later, despite sustained international effort to contain the Islamic State and stem the flow of militants traveling to Syria, the number of foreign fighters has more than doubled.

• Based on its own investigation, The Soufan Group has calculated that between 27,000 and 31,000 people have traveled to Syria and Iraq to join the Islamic State and other violent extremist groups from at least 86 countries.

• The increase is evidence that efforts to contain the flow of foreign recruits to extremist groups in Syria and Iraq have had limited impact.

• The increase in foreign fighters is not uniform throughout the world; certain regions and countries have seen more significant rises than others.

• The number of foreign fighters from Western Europe has more than doubled since June 2014, while it has remained relatively flat in North America.

• Foreign fighters from Russia and Central Asia have shown a significant rise; some estimates suggest a near 300% increase in known fighters since June 2014.

• Recruitment within the United States has been mostly reliant on social media, particularly in the initial phases of the process.

• In the countries with the largest flows, recruitment to the Islamic State has become more focused and localized, with fewer people just leaving on their own; family and friends are playing a greater role.

• The average rate of returnees to Western countries is now at around 20-30%, presenting a significant challenge to security and law enforcement agencies that must assess the threat they pose.

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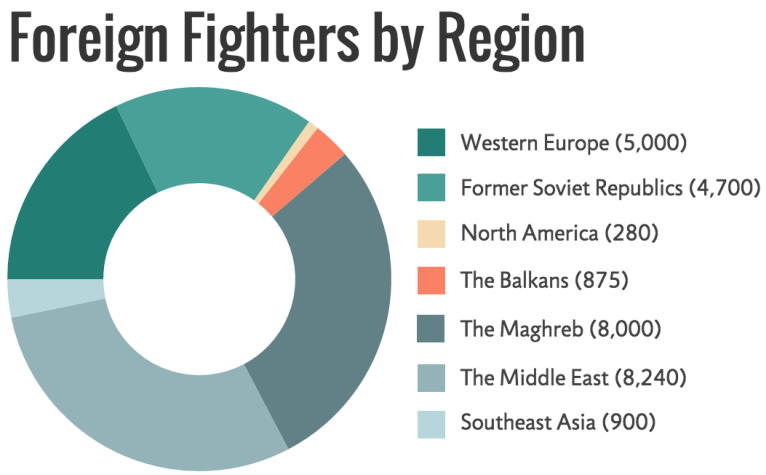
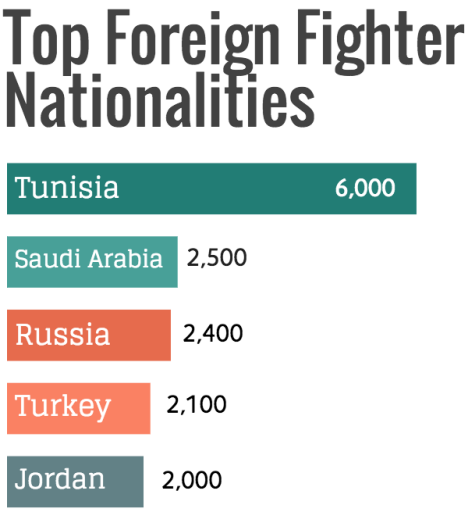
[1] The original paper, *Foreign Fighters in Syria*, was published in June 2014 (http://soufangroup.com/foreign-fighters-in-syria/).

## Introduction

This paper is intended to update the numbers of foreign fighters traveling to join the so-called Islamic State and other violent extremist groups in Iraq and Syria provided by The Soufan Group (TSG) in June 2014. Since then, other reports have emerged, including in September 2015 when United States intelligence estimates put the number of foreign fighters in Syria at upwards of 30,000 from over 100 countries. TSG research, which includes information provided directly by officials, largely confirms these figures.

The numbers in this report have been compiled from official government estimates wherever possible, but also derive from United Nations reports, studies by research bodies, academic sources, and from other sources quoting government officials. Inevitably, whatever their source, the numbers quoted are subject to an inherent level of uncertainty. Many governments do not release official estimates of the number of their citizens who have gone to Syria and Iraq, and those that do, whether formally or informally, do not reveal their methodology and may struggle to achieve accuracy. Also, for some, the number may reflect all those who have gone, while others may subtract the number of returnees and/or those who have died. Some may not include women and children, while others do. It is rare that governments provide a detailed breakdown of their numbers and in all cases it is likely that more have gone than the relevant government is aware of or prepared to admit.



## The Numbers

The rise of extremist groups in the anarchy of the Syrian civil war and the post-invasion chaos of Iraq remains essentially a local and regional phenomenon, with the majority of recruits coming from Arab states. Tunisians, Saudis, and Jordanians continue to outnumber other national contingents, although a reverse flow to North Africa may alter the balance within the Arab group. Neighboring Turkey is also a significant provider of manpower, though perhaps inevitably, Turkish fighters appear to return home in greater numbers than those from elsewhere. The Turkish authorities had imprisoned 500 citizens for joining the Islamic State by November 2015, and another 100 for joining Jabhat al-Nusra.[2]

While an absence of reliable figures makes it difficult to estimate any increase in the flow of Arabs to Iraq and Syria, the numbers traveling from Western Europe and Russia seem to have continued to climb, despite the various attempts by individual countries and the international community to stem the flow. The appeal of the Islamic State appears to be as strong as before, despite—or in some cases because of—the multiplying examples of its horrific violence and increasing totalitarianism.

**"Tunisians, Saudis, and Jordanians continue to outnumber other national contingents, although a reverse flow to North Africa may alter the balance within the Arab group"**

It is too early to judge how Russia's direct involvement in the Syrian civil war on behalf of the regime, and the growing engagement of certain European countries in the aerial bombardment of the Islamic State, may affect the flow of recruits to Syria. However, even after a year of increasing intensity, the campaign launched against the Islamic State and Jabhat al-Nusra by the United States has made little difference to the number of recruits from North America, which has remained relatively flat.

This suggests that the motivation for people to join violent extremist groups in Syria and Iraq remains more personal than political. Although much of the propaganda put out by the Islamic State focuses on the civilian casualties arising from the military campaign waged against it, the majority of its video production appeals to those who seek a new beginning rather than revenge for past acts. A search for belonging, purpose, adventure, and friendship, appear to remain the main reasons for people to join the Islamic State, just as they remain the least addressed issues in the international fight against terrorism.

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[2] Official briefing in Ankara, November 2015.

Although anecdotal evidence suggests that it has become harder for individuals to leave territory controlled by the Islamic State, as time has passed, the number of individuals returning to their home countries from the fighting in Syria and Iraq has increased. Their motivation for leaving may vary as much as their motivation for joining; some will have had enough of the violence, some may have become disillusioned with the Islamic State and its leadership, and others may have simply decided to pursue their goals elsewhere. Little is known about them, and for the time being, it is too early to say what this means in terms of the threat to national security.

**"The motivation for people to join violent extremist groups in Syria and Iraq remains more personal than political"**

So far as can be ascertained from their own accounts, the great majority of recruits to the Islamic State continue to go to Syria with the intention of acting there rather than training to become domestic terrorists. But the attacks in Paris on 13 November 2015 may reflect a growing trend of overseas terrorism being planned and organized from the Islamic State. The understanding of motivation, both of those who join and of those who leave, remains of key importance—not just in helping to ensure the deployment of scarce resources to where they are most needed, but also in identifying returnees who can undermine the appeal of the Islamic State by speaking with credibility and authority about its true nature.

| Countries | Official Count | Last Update | Non-Official | TSG 2014 Figures | Returnees |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Afghanistan | | Jan, 2015 | 50 | | |
| Albania | 90 | May, 2015 | 100-200 | | |
| Algeria | 170 | May, 2015 | 200-250 | c. 200 | |
| Argentina | | 2012 | 23 | | |
| Australia | 120 | Oct, 2015 | 255 | c. 250 | |
| Austria | 300 | Oct, 2015 | 233 | | 70 |
| Azerbaijan | 104+ | May, 2014 | 216 | | 49 |
| Belgium | 470 | Oct, 2015 | 470 | c. 250 | 118 |

| Countries | Official Count | Last Update | Non-Official | TSG 2014 Figures | Returnees |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Bosnia | 330 | Oct, 2015 | 217 | | 51 |
| Brazil | 3 | Jul, 2015 | | | |
| Cambodia | 1 | Jun, 2015 | | | |
| Canada | 130 | Oct, 2015 | | 30 | |
| China | 300 | Nov, 2014 | | | |
| Denmark | 125 | Oct, 2015 | 100-150 | 100 | 62 |
| Egypt | 600+ | Jan, 2015 | 1000 | | |
| Finland | 70 | Aug, 2015 | 70-100 | c. 30 | 25+ |
| France | 1700 | May, 2015 | | c. 700 | c. 250 |
| Georgia | | Jul, 2015 | 50 | | |
| Germany | 760 | Nov, 2015 | | 270 | 200+ |
| India | 23 | Nov, 2015 | 40-50 | | 1 |
| Indonesia | 700 | Jul, 2015 | c. 500 | 30-60 | 162 |
| Ireland | 30 | Nov, 2015 | 30 | 25-30 | |
| Israel | 40-50 | Jan, 2015 | | | |
| Italy | 87 | Nov, 2015 | | | 10 |
| Japan | | Mar, 2015 | 9 | | |
| Jordan | 2000+ | Sep, 2015 | 2500 | | |
| Kazakhstan | 300 | Jan, 2015 | | | |
| Kosovo | 232 | Oct, 2015 | 300 | 100-120 | |
| Kuwait | | Jan, 2015 | 70 | | |
| Kyrgyzstan | | Nov, 2015 | 500 | 10+ | |
| Lebanon | 900 | Sep, 2015 | | | |
| Libya | | Jan, 2015 | 600 | | |
| Macedonia | 146 | Aug, 2015 | 100 | | |
| Madagascar | 3+ | Jun, 2015 | | | |

| Countries | Official Count | Last Update | Non-Official | TSG 2014 Figures | Returnees |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Malaysia | 100 | Nov, 2015 | | | 5+ |
| Maldives | 200 | May, 2015 | 20-100 | | |
| Moldova | 1+ | Jan, 2015 | | | |
| Montenegro | | Sep, 2014 | 30 | | |
| Morocco | 1200 | Oct, 2015 | 1500 | c. 1500 | |
| Netherlands | 220 | Oct, 2015 | 210 | 120 | 40 |
| New Zealand | 5 to 10 | Mar, 2015 | 6 | | |
| Norway | 81 | Oct, 2015 | 60 | 40-50 | |
| Pakistan | 70 | Aug, 2015 | 330 | | |
| Philippines | 100 | Aug, 2014 | | | |
| Portugal | | 2015 | 12 | | |
| Qatar | | Dec, 2015 | c. 10 | | |
| Romania | 1+ | Mar, 2015 | | | |
| Russia | 2400 | Sep, 2015 | | c. 800 | |
| Saudi Arabia | 2500 | Oct, 2015 | | c. 2500 | |
| Serbia | | Jul, 2015 | 50-70 | | |
| Singapore | 2 | Jul, 2015 | | 1 | |
| South Africa | 1+ | Jun, 2015 | | | |
| Somalia | | Jan, 2015 | 70 | | |
| Spain | 133 | Oct, 2015 | 250 | 51 | |
| Sudan | 70 | Sep, 2015 | 100 | | 2 |
| Sweden | 300 | Oct, 2015 | 300 | c. 30 | 115 |
| Switzerland | 57 | Oct, 2015 | | c. 10 | 3 |
| Tajikistan | 386 | May, 2015 | | | |
| Trinidad | | 2014 | 50 | | |
| Tunisia | 6000 | Oct, 2015 | 7000 | c. 3000 | 625+ |

| Countries | Official Count | Last Update | Non-Official | TSG 2014 Figures | Returnees |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Turkey | 2000-2200 | Nov, 2015 | | c. 400 | 600+ |
| Turkmenistan | | Jan, 2015 | 360 | | |
| UAE | | Jan, 2015 | 15 | | |
| UK | 760 | Nov, 2015 | | c. 400 | 350 |
| USA | 150 | Oct, 2015 | 250+ | 70+ | 40 |
| Uzbekistan | | Jan, 2015 | 500 | | |

(TSG has noted no updated numbers for the following countries featured in its 2014 report: Armenia, Bahrain, Bangladesh, Bulgaria, Chad, Chile, Côte d'Ivoire, Czech Republic, Eritrea, Estonia, Hungary, Iran, Luxembourg, Mauritania, Oman, Palestine, Poland, Senegal, Ukraine, and Yemen)

## Hotbeds of Recruitment

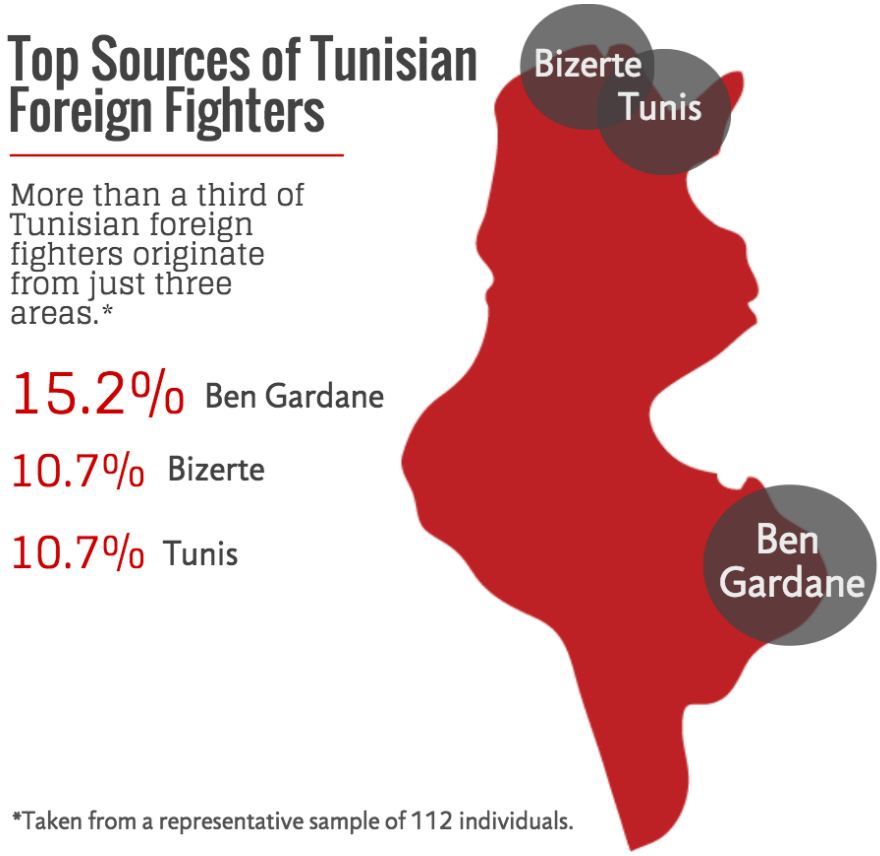
The foreign fighter phenomenon in Iraq and Syria is truly global, with at least 86 countries seeing at least one of their citizens or residents travel to Syria to fight for extremist groups there, primarily for the Islamic State. But the flow is neither uniform by region nor by country, regardless of the pool of residents who may be susceptible to the Islamic State's appeal. Hotbeds of recruitment have emerged scattered within the global influx. Some are small, like the Lisleby district of Fredrikstad in Norway; others are well-established incubators and radiators of extremist behavior, such as Bizerte and Ben Gardane in Tunisia; Derna in Libya; the Pankisi Gorge in Georgia; and the Molenbeek district of Brussels.

The existence of these hotbeds results from the personal nature of recruitment. Joining the Islamic State is not a rational act so much as an emotional one, and the involvement of family or a close acquaintance in the radicalization process is a frequent determinant of the outcome. Where one joins, another is more likely to follow. Areas where there are close-knit groups of susceptible youth, often lacking a sense of purpose or belonging outside their own circle, have proved to generate a momentum of recruitment that spreads through personal contacts from group to group.

While the power of the Islamic State's social media outreach is undeniable, it appears more often to prepare the ground for persuasion, rather than to force the decision. There are few places on earth in which the group's message and imagery cannot be

seen or heard, and its ubiquitous reach has led to the recruitment of individuals from Algeria to Uzbekistan. Yet, as hotbeds develop, recruitment through social media becomes less important than via direct human contact, as clusters of friends and neighbors persuade each other to travel separately or together to join the Islamic State.

In the space of a year, eight young men left the Lisleby district of Fredrikstad, in Norway, to go to Syria.[3] Lisleby is an area with a population of around 6,000, so the proportion of recruits is exceptional. If replicated across the population of the United States this would mean 413,400 Americans had joined the Islamic State. This cluster appears to have flowed from the influence of a single, charismatic individual. The district of Molenbeek in Brussels, the hometown of many members of the Islamic State cell that attacked Paris in November 2015, is another example of a concentrated area where a cluster can develop. Belgium's Interior Minister Jan Jambon said in November 2015 that the majority of Belgian foreign fighters came from Brussels, in particular Molenbeek.




While Lisleby and Molenbeek are relative newcomers to the production of foreign fighters, two Tunisian towns have a long history of such violent exportation. As many as 7,000 people may have traveled from Tunisia to Syria and Iraq, a good deal of whom have come from Bizerte in the north and Ben Gardane in the south, an infamous smuggling hub, with generations raised on evading and defying

[3] Andrew Higgins, "A Norway Town and Its Pipeline to Jihad in Syria," *The New York Times*, April 4, 2015. Accessed December 2, 2015. http://www.nytimes.com/2015/04/05/world/europe/a-norway-town-and-its-pipeline-to-jihad-in-syria.html?_r=0)

government authority. In their relative isolation, comfort with cross-border travel and antagonism towards outsiders, families in Ben Gardane have proved susceptible to the call of violent extremism.

Derna in Libya also has a long history of exporting violent extremists. Many of the estimated 600 people from Libya who have gone to fight for violent jihadist causes are from the Derna region. Derna was also the biggest contributor to the fighting in Iraq between 2003 and 2009, and before that it provided fighters in the 1980s for the Afghan Jihad against the Soviet Union, many of whom joined the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG) that mounted an insurgency against the Qadhafi regime from 1995-1998.

## The Numbers by Region

### *Western Europe*

As recorded in the TSG Foreign Fighters report, by June 2014, approximately 2,500 individuals from western European countries had traveled to Syria to join the civil war. By December 2015—18 months later—this number had more than doubled. Estimates indicate that more than 5,000 fighters from member states of the European Union alone have made the trip to Syria.

**"3,700 of the total 5,000+ European Union foreign fighter contingent come from just four countries"**

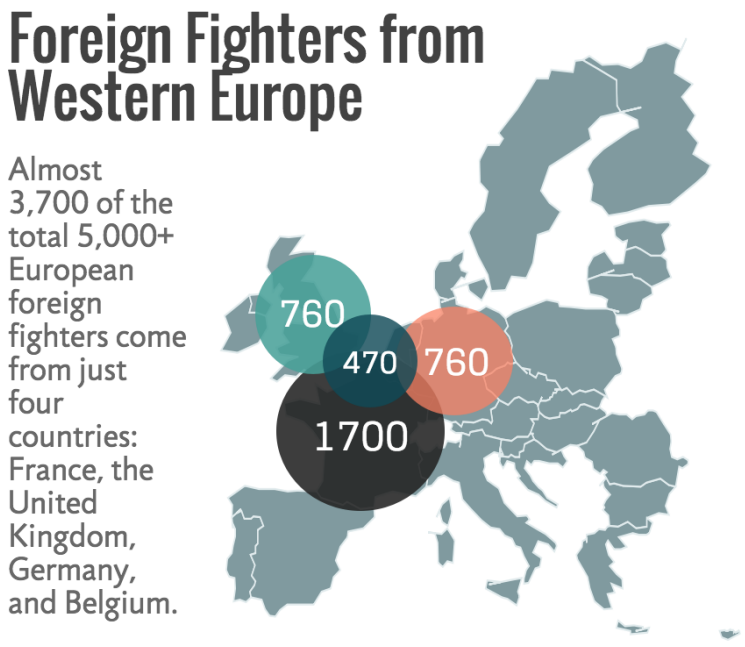
While all western European countries that have published figures have seen an increase in people traveling to Syria, some contribute a disproportionate percentage. Official estimates from French authorities indicate around 1,700 individuals had left France to join the fighting as of October 2015.[4] Another 760 fighters from the United Kingdom and 760 from Germany had gone to Syria as of November 2015, along with 470 from Belgium as of October 2015.[5] Based on these estimates, almost 3,700 of the total 5,000+ European Union foreign fighter contingent come from just four countries.

The secular nature of western European countries like France and Belgium, which top the poll for the highest number of fighters per capita, coupled with a sense of

[4] According to a statement by Prime Minister Valls in October 2015.

[5] Briefing by Government officials, October 2015.

marginalization among immigrant communities, especially those from North Africa, appear to have played a role in the radicalization process. Against this sense of alienation, the propaganda of the Islamic State offers an attractive alternative of belonging, purpose, adventure and respect. Many, though by no means all, of the recruits to the Islamic State, particularly from Northern Europe, have a record of minor criminality and may have spent time in prison. The Islamic State offers them a new identity that is less determined by their past than by their potential contribution in the future. The cost—an acceptance of a narrow set of rules, strictly enforced—is further offset by the Islamic State's supposed basis in religion, and the fact that its rules are uniformly applied.




The age range of recruits has remained the same since the TSG report in June 2014, with most being in their 20s, but some much younger. The speed of radicalization also remains a feature, with the whole process generally taking weeks rather than months. There is, however, more evidence of community-based recruitment in countries with the highest numbers of foreign fighters, where groups of acquaintances are drawn into a common identity. The Molenbeek neighborhood in Brussels, where several of the perpetrators of the attacks in Paris in November lived and knew each other, is an example of this.[6] While social media undoubtedly plays a role in the recruitment of fighters from Western Europe, it is—perhaps—understandable that, over time, people who have already gone to Syria reach out in person to their friends and acquaintances to encourage them to do the same. Recruitment efforts both on and offline appear to have become more insistent and better organized. The influence of returnees in this process is still unknown.

[6] Andrew Higgins, Kimiko de Freytas-Tamura and Katrin Bennhold, "In Suspects' Brussels Neighborhood, a History of Petty Crimes and Missed Chances," *The New York Times*, November 16, 2015. Accessed December 2, 2015. http://www.nytimes.com/2015/11/17/world/europe/in-suspects-brussels-neighborhood-a-history-of-petty-crimes-and-missed-chances.html?_r=0.

## *Russia and the Former Soviet Republics*

While the surge of Western foreign fighters and the security implications of their potential return have received a lot of attention, less has been given to foreign fighters traveling from outside Western Europe and North America. In October 2015, Russian President Vladimir Putin publicly stated that 5,000 to 7,000 fighters from Russia and the former Soviet republics had traveled to Syria to join the Islamic State.

Based on these figures, the number of foreign fighters from the former Soviet Union has increased considerably since June 2014. Official estimates from the Russian Federation alone suggest that 2,400 Russians had joined the Islamic State by September 2015; compared to over 800 by June 2014. Comparatively speaking, this increase is far more substantial proportionately than that seen in Western Europe over the same time span.

TSG has identified credible reports of foreign fighters in Syria from 12 of the 15 former Soviet republics. Based on the best available information, TSG calculates that there are at least 4,700 fighters from the region, in line with the lower end of the official estimate provided by Russian authorities.

The majority of fighters come from the North Caucasus—Chechnya and Dagestan—with a smaller but still significant number from Azerbaijan and Georgia.[7] Reliable information on the specific number of fighters from Azerbaijan and Georgia is limited, although some estimates have put the combined total from both countries at around 500.[8] Similar to parts of Europe with a high number of foreign fighters, there appears to be a pattern within Azerbaijan by which Islamic State recruits generally come from several distinct towns, in particular Sumqayit, Shabran, and Qusar.[9]

The North Caucasus has a long history of Islamist extremism, and the increased flow of fighters from this region is in many ways unsurprising. Local grievances have long

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[7] Amanda Paul, "Foreign Fighters from the Caucasus," *NRT News*, July 21, 2015. Accessed December 2, 2015. http://nrttv.com/EN/birura-details.aspx?Jimare=1358.

[8] Ibid.

[9] The North Caucasus Caucus, "The Clear Banner: The Forgotten Azerbaijani Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq," *Jihadology*, February 2, 2015. Accessed December 2, 2015. http://jihadology.net/2015/02/02/the-clear-banner-azerbaijani-foreign-fighters-in-2014/.

been drivers of radicalization in the Caucasus,[10] and as the strong centralized security apparatus of the Russian government limits the scope for operations at home, the Islamic State has offered an attractive alternative. As in the West, much of the recruitment appears to happen through peer-to-peer interaction, and it may increase in line with Russian involvement in the Syrian civil war.

Central Asian countries have also seen a significant increase in the numbers of their citizens becoming foreign fighters. TSG has identified reports that suggest a combined total of approximately 2,000 from Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. In August 2015, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, which has operated in Afghanistan and Pakistan since the early 2000s, became part of the Islamic State.

Nonetheless, as with foreign fighters from the North Caucasus, militants from Central Asian countries who travel to Syria join their own groups or operate under al-Qaeda affiliates such as Jabhat al-Nusra. However, some often travel to Syria simply because direct contact with the Islamic State offers more opportunity than local groups such as the Islamic Caucasus Emirate. The political vacuum and chaos in Syria allows the Islamic State and other jihadist groups to operate with more freedom of action than they would find in Central Asia.

### *The Maghreb and North Africa*

The great majority of foreign fighters in Iraq and Syria are from Arab countries, with both the Middle East and the Maghreb supplying large numbers. As of October 2015, an estimated 6,000 fighters had traveled to Syria from Tunisia.[11] According to Tunisian authorities, 700 Tunisian women have traveled to Syria to join the Islamic State and other groups.[12] In May 2015, the official Moroccan government estimate provided to the United Nations was 1,200, though the true number is likely to be higher. Estimates from Libya and Algeria are also somewhat limited, but as of January

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[10] "Exporting Jihad: Foreign Fighters from the North Caucasus and Central Asia and the Syrian Civil War," *Chatham House: Russia and Eurasia Programme*, September 23, 2015. Accessed December 2, 2015. https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/files/chathamhouse/events/special/Summary%20FSU%20fighters%20in%20Syria%2001102015%20JM.pdf

[11] United Nations Security Council, Implementation of Security Council Resolution 2178 (2014) by States Affected by Foreign Terrorist Fighters: Second Report. S/2015/683, September 2, 2015.

[12] Agence France-Presse, "Hundreds of Tunisian women join jihadists in Syria: Minister," *The Times of India*, December 5, 2015. Accessed December 6, 2015: http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/world/middle-east/Hundreds-of-Tunisian-women-join-jihadists-in-Syria-Minister/articleshow/50050192.cms.

2015, around 600 Libyans[13] were believed to have traveled to Syria, and in May 2015 there were believed to be around 170 Algerians[14] participating in the civil war. Since then, there appears to have been a reverse flow, especially to Libya, where the Islamic State is establishing a significant presence, even encouraging foreign recruits to join it there as an alternative to Syria and Iraq.

North Africa has an entrenched tradition of violent jihadism dating back to individual participation in the Soviet-Afghan War. For a number of the North African countries included in this report, the populations of foreign fighters traveling to Syria and Iraq can be traced back to specific areas of the country. These foreign fighter hubs represent a confluence of factors that draw disproportionate numbers of individuals to violent extremism. Though the hubs have certain common factors—such as high levels of unemployment—each locale presents a unique case. The recruitment and training networks in North Africa are largely peer-to-peer; individuals are motivated to travel to Iraq and Syria by friends, family, or influential members of their communities.

For some countries, such as Libya and Tunisia, the phenomenon of foreign fighter hubs is even more apparent. In Libya, the eastern coastal region—especially Benghazi and Derna—is known as a hotbed for recruitment. In Tunisia, the city of Ben Gardane has provided the largest number of foreign fighters, despite being a city of less than 80,000. The tradition of jihad is so strong in Ben Gardane that the former leader of al-Qaeda in Iraq, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, allegedly said, "If Ben Gardane had been located next to Fallujah, we would have liberated Iraq." In Morocco, the Sidi Moumen slum outside Casablanca has also been a ready source of violent extremists, including suicide bombers.

The continued deterioration of the security situation in Libya presents a severe destabilizing factor for the region as a whole. The country is now being used as a transit hub for fighters traveling back and forth from Syria and Iraq, with many traveling to Khartoum before making the journey across the desert to lawless Libyan territory. For fragile states like Tunisia, returning fighters pose a particular threat to stability—a threat the government is struggling to contain. Following the bombing of a bus carrying presidential guard soldiers in November, the Tunisian government announced the closure of its border with Libya, an explicit acknowledgement of the

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[13] Peter R. Neumann, "Foreign Fight Total in Syria Now Exceeds 20,000; Surpasses Afghanistan Conflict in the 1980s," *ICSR*, January 26, 2015. Accessed December 2, 2015. http://icsr.info/2015/01/foreign-fighter-total-syriairaq-now-exceeds-20000-surpasses-afghanistan-conflict-1980s/.

[14] Lisa Watanabe, "Foreign Fighters and Their Return: Measures Taken by North African Countries," *ISN-ETH Zurich*, November 9, 2015. Accessed December 2, 2015. http://www.isn.ethz.ch/Digital-Library/Articles/Detail/?id=194607.

fact that Tunisian jihadist fighters were using its destabilized neighbor as a transit hub.

### *The Horn of Africa*

Data on foreign fighters from countries within the Horn of Africa is limited. Somalia, home to al-Shabaab, which is part of al-Qaeda, reportedly had around 70 fighters in Syria as of January 2015.[15] In September 2015, a Sudanese government official made a statement that 70 fighters from Sudan had traveled to Syria.[16] There are also reports of an unspecified number of fighters from Eritrea engaged in the civil war.

The Somali contingent with the Islamic State appear from their accents to be drawn mainly from the diaspora, but they and other Islamic State promoters made a concerted effort over the second half of 2015 to persuade al Shabaab, or as many of its members as possible, to switch their allegiance from al-Qaeda. This resulted in the defection of 20-30 fighters in an area well to the north of al-Shabaab strongholds declaring for the Islamic State under a prominent ideologue. But there is as yet no evidence that even this small number has attempted to travel to Iraq or Syria.

### *The Balkans*

As with the former Soviet republics, the Balkans have historically been home to a small but sizable population of violent Islamist extremists. This is particularly true of countries in the western Balkans with majority Muslim populations.[17] TSG has identified reports suggesting that at least 875 fighters have traveled to Syria from the Balkans, with fighters coming from at least seven different countries in the region. Almost 800 of these fighters come from just four countries—Albania, Bosnia, Kosovo, and Macedonia—all located in the western Balkans.

In June 2014, there was relatively little information on how many militants from the Balkans had traveled to Syria, making the proportional increase in fighters from the region difficult to determine. Based on the available data however, it would appear

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[15] Neumann, "Foreign Fighter Total"

[16] Per October 13, 2015 Announcement by the Sudanese Ministry of the Interior.

[17] U.S. Congressional Research Service, *European Fighters in Syria and Iraq: Assessments, Responses, and Issues for the United States*, by Kristin Archick, Paul Belkin, Christopher M. Blanchard, Carla E. Humud, and Derek E. Mix, 7-5700 (Washington, D.C.: 2005).

that the number of fighters from the Balkans has at least doubled, if not tripled, since June 2014.

In the 1990s, the Balkans were a destination for foreign violent jihadists. The relatively high number of sympathizers of the Islamic State within the Balkans has transformed the region into a transit hub for fighters from other areas looking to get to Syria.[18]

The Islamic State has put substantial effort into persuading violent Islamists from the Balkans to join the group in Syria. The Islamic State has sought to take advantage of existing extremist networks in the Balkans and a high number of sympathizers there both to recruit fighters and to provide assistance for recruits from other parts of the world who are trying to get to Syria.[19]

### *Southeast Asia*

The official counts for Southeast Asians fighting in Syria may be on the high side. Although the Indonesian government came up with an official count of 700 Indonesians in November 2015, analysts believe the actual number of fighters is no more than 500. A former Philippines president told reporters in August 2014 that at least 100 of his countrymen were training in Islamic State-held territory in Iraq. That figure has been disputed by other parts of the government although Filipinos have been spotted in Islamic State videos.

In sum, it may be more accurate to say that there are at least 600 Southeast Asians fighting in Syria. The vast majority are from Indonesia, with Malaysians a distant second with many more stopped before they could leave the country. Initially grouped with central Asians, there are now enough Indonesian and Malay-speaking foreign fighters with the Islamic State to form a unit by themselves—the *Katibah Nusantara* (Malay Archipelago Combat Unit). Since July 2014, the Islamic State has posted propaganda and recruitment videos aimed at persuading Indonesians and Malaysians to perform *hijrah* to Syria with their families. One video showed Malay-speaking

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[18] Erin Banco, "Balkans Track ISIS Fighters Flowing Through Turkey , Overwhelmed by Lax Border Control," *International Business Times*, June 23, 2015. Accessed December 2, 2015. http://www.ibtimes.com/balkans-track-isis-fighters-flowing-through-turkey-overwhelmed-lax-border-control-1980602.

[19] Hristo Voynov, "ISIS and the Balkans: Part Two," *Vostokian Magazine*, July 11, 2015. Accessed December 2, 2015. http://www.vostokian.com/isis-and-the-balkans-part-two.

children training with weapons in Islamic State-held territory while two Malaysians were featured in another Islamic State video of the beheading of a Syrian man.[20]

The first Indonesian fighters to go to Syria were already in the Middle East on student visas, often sponsored by radical groups at home that also introduced them to the Arab mujahidin networks that originally funneled fighters into Afghanistan. Their posts on social media spoke of "five-star jihad" in Syria and when tweets of the first Indonesian "martyrs" to die fighting the Assad regime surfaced, a steady stream of known extremists and those who had previously fought with the al-Qaeda affiliate in Southeast Asia, Jemaah Islamiyah, began heading to Syria. When Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi declared his caliphate, the extremist community began recruiting in earnest, transforming support for local jihadi struggles into support for Islamic State, egged on by a radical preacher admired for translating Islamic State literature into Indonesian from prison. Up to 50 of these fighters have since returned to Indonesia, some claiming disillusionment because they did not receive the pay they were promised. Another hundred, including women and children, were apparently deported from Turkey before they could cross the border into Syria.

The 141 Malaysians and handful of Singaporeans arrested in their countries before they could leave for Syria offer an instructive contrast. They largely had no prior association with extremist groups, appeared to be motivated by a desire to be good Muslims and had a romanticized notion of an Islamic caliphate. After viewing Islamic State propaganda online, they believed that the the Islamic State caliphate offered them a life of piety that would increase their chances of rewards in the afterlife. At the same time, some of them were prepared to carry out attacks at home in support of the Islamic State if they could not travel to Syria,[21] and to punish their governments.[22]

## *The Americas*

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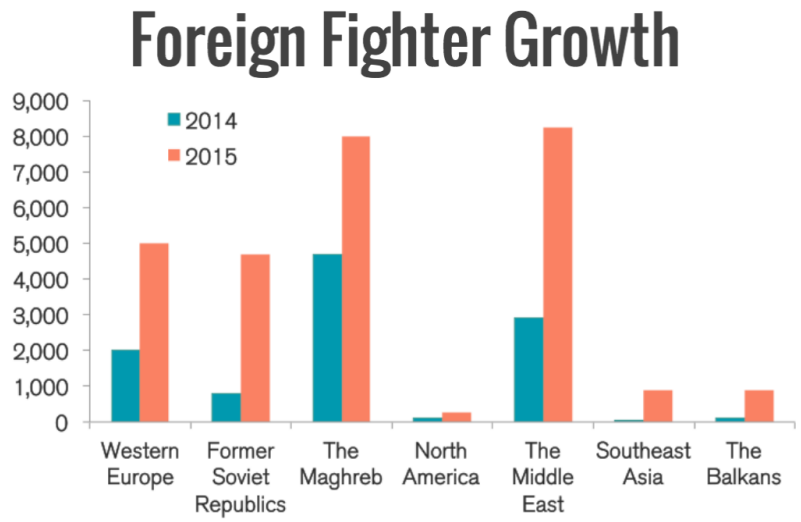
[20] Transcript of Keynote Speech by Singapore Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong at the Shangri-La Dialogue on 29 May 2015, available at http://www.pmo.gov.sg/mediacentre/transcript-keynote-speech-prime-minister-lee-hsien-loong-shangri-la-dialogue-29-may-2015.

[21] "S'porean teen aimed to join ISIS or launch attacks here," *The Straits Times*, May 28, 2015, available at http://news.asiaone.com/news/singapore/sporean-teen-aimed-join-isis-or-launch-attacks-here#sthash.Z5DwWuPq.dpuf.

[22] "Malaysia says country's top leaders on ISIS kidnap list," *The Straits Times*, November 17, 2015, and "ISIS attack on Malaysia imminent, says top counterterror official," *Today*, April 3, 2015.

Compared to the substantial increases in foreign fighters from western European countries, the flow of foreign fighters from the Americas has remained relatively stable and far lower in terms of per capita numbers. According to FBI Director James Comey, a total of 250 Americans had traveled or attempted to travel to Syria as of September 2015, with only about 150 being successful. In October 2015, Canadian authorities estimated that approximately 130 Canadians had gone to Syria.[23] There have been reports of fighters from some South American countries, including Argentina and Brazil, but the numbers are very low.

Generally speaking, recruitment within the Americas has been mostly reliant on social media, particularly in the initial phases of the process. Potential recruits initially connect with Islamic State sympathizers or members via social media, with subsequent follow up by online peer-to-peer interaction. There are no significant patterns of locally based recruitment in the Americas—nor recruitment hot spots—as seen in Europe and the former Soviet republics.




## Conclusion

[23] Canadian Government briefing (October 29, 2015).

The Syrian civil war will not end soon, and although the Islamic State is under more pressure than it was in June 2014 when TSG produced its original report, it is likely to survive in some form for a considerable time to come. It will attract more recruits from abroad, but they may differ from the earlier wave of hopefuls who were attracted by the prospect of a brand new state that would provide them what they could not find at home. As the Islamic State changes its focus from consolidating control of territory to attacking its foreign enemies in their own homelands, or their interests elsewhere, the profile of its foreign recruits will also change.

The Islamic State has seen success beyond the dreams of other terrorist groups that now appear conventional and even old-fashioned, such as al-Qaeda. It has energized tens of thousands of people to join it, and inspired many more to support it. Even if the Islamic State is a failing enterprise in steady decline, it will be able to influence the actions of its adherents, and it may become more dangerous as it dies. The challenge to the international community remains, and will be harder to meet as foreign fighters become more adept at disguising their movements and more uncertain in their future intentions.

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# The Soufan Group

**The Soufan Group** provides strategic security intelligence services to governments and multinational organizations. Our training programs, security services, and research insights arm our clients with the essential knowledge and skills to prepare for, manage and respond to constantly evolving security needs.

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